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Elite and Mass Confidence in New Democracies – Towards Congruence? The Baltic States 1992-2007

Anton Steen^{*}

Abstract: »Eliten- und Bevölkerungsvertrauen in neuen Demokratien – auf dem Weg zur Konvergenz? Die baltischen Staaten 1992-2007«. Confidence in political and social institutions is of basic importance for democratic rule. The topic here is the patterns of elite and mass confidence in parliament, police, private business, and the church, in three Baltic States following the collapse of communism. The main finding is that elite's confidence in new institutions is considerably more affirmative than among the mass public, indicating their leading role in the consolidation process. I argue that this finding is more in line with the theory of democratic elitism than liberal democratic theory and underscore the vital role of elites in the process of democratic consolidation. However, gaps and trends over time vary between the countries, which also accentuate the importance of national contexts as explanations.

Keywords: elite, mass confidence, democracy, democratic consolidation, Baltic States.

Introduction

Democratic regimes require mass public as well as elite support in order to sustain their legitimacy, preserve stability and perform vital functions. A certain level of support for political and social institutions is important in established democracies, and even more important in countries where authoritarian rule and state economic planning recently have been replaced by democracy and a free market economy, as in the three Baltic States following the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. However, there are debates as to what is the required level of public support, and what is the necessary level of congruence between elite- and mass support, as well as what are the implications of variation in support and congruence for legitimate democratic rule. An occasional gap in confidence may be difficult to interpret, and such a gap does not usually undermine political stability. More consequential and important for democratic stability and quality of democracy, especially in new democracies, are long-term trends in elite and mass views of vital institutions. A central question therefore, is how congruent are the elite and mass assessments in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the three Baltic States under scrutiny in this paper?

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Here I will compare the elite and mass views concerning the two focal *new institutions*, parliament and the market economy, and how these views correspond to confidence in two *old institutions* continuing from the past, the police and the church. The democratic challenge is that after change of regime, in the short run, elected politicians and the market system often cannot live up to people's expectations. Mass confidence will then erode, making the stability of new institutions particularly contingent on the elite's confidence in them. As to old institutions continuing from the past, common experiences may create a more congruent pattern of confidence among mass and elite.

It is widely acknowledged that elites play a major role in change of authoritarian regimes and in democratic consolidation, but we know much less about the dynamics of elite and mass attitudes to basic institutions in this process. *Liberal democratic theory* argues that the elite's beliefs and actions stem from the views of mass publics, while *democratic elitism* suggests that elites actively shape democratic institutions, and that they pave the way in granting legitimacy to new institutions and new social and political order. Comparing patterns of elite-mass confidence in central institutions over time may give us some answers as to which of the competing theoretical claims is more accurate.

Democratic Theory and the Elite-Mass Connection

Liberal democratic theory suggests that congruence between elite and mass confidence is a prerequisite of sustainable democracy. The theory argues that elected elites act (and should act) as delegates expressing the opinions the voters want them to hold. In this vein, Pitkin's theory of political representation (1967) claims that elite-mass congruence has to be regarded as a requirement for democratic rule, while gaps between elites and the mass public indicate a lack of democratic consolidation. Consequently, one could expect that elite-mass orientations are interdependent and that confidence in institutions will reflect a congruent pattern.

Alternatively, democratic elitist theory claims that representatives are autonomous (and should be independent); they should be considered as authorized agents that follow their own convictions as to what is in the best interest of the people, being held accountable through election cycles. This is even more true when elites who are not directly accountable to the public vote are included. Elite orientations are independent of the mass public; elites shape the views of the masses, and "institutions that constitute liberal democracy is primarily an elite creation to which mass publics gradually and slowly accede" (Higley and Burton 2006, 3). If democratic consolidation is a process where liberal elites are established, and where the mass public slowly complies with elites' liberal orientations – as democratic elitists argue – one would expect a considerable differences of views between elites and the mass public in the early stages, and a gradual convergence of views over time.

Most observers agree that consolidation of democratic institutions depends on a general agreement among the public and their leaders that the new institutions are a better option than the institutions of the former regime. However, as Petersson (2010) argues, elite-mass congruence of views is not the only basis of democratic legitimacy. In addition, I argue that the condition of elite-mass congruence in the Baltic States applies not only to core political institutions, such as *parliament* and free elections: important services are also performed by the state bureaucracy and institutions maintaining public order, such as *police*, the latter often surviving from the former regime. Further, the new political regime was closely connected to a change of economic regime, whereby *private business companies* replaced a state regulated economy almost over-night. This is an important part of the overall transformation which had substantial impact on people's daily lives. And one has to remember that *the church* has survived oppression and takes on a new and active social and political role in shaping a new regime. Indeed, the church represents an interesting contrasting institution when comparing elite and mass attitudes in times of regime consolidation; its special symbolic function is different from that of the parliament, from private business companies, and from the police.

If democracy is to be stable and representative, a consensually united elite must be formed and founded on an underlying consensus on most norms of political behaviour and "the worth of existing political institutions" (Higley and Burton 2006, 15). The advocates of democratic elitism argue that this thesis is applicable to all regime changes from authoritarian to stable democratic (Higley and Burton 2006, 19; Higley 2007, 250). However, the changes following the collapse of communism illustrate various elite patterns and diverse trajectories of elite change, and it is only in Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic that a consensually unified elite came into power in the early stages following regime change (Higley, Pakulski and Wesołowski 1998, 7). This means that the elites evolving in these societies shared basic beliefs and values about fundamental institutions and procedures for political competition. The democracies that emerged were constructions of consensual – or at least consensus-reaching, elites. The same may be said about the new Baltic elites after 1991 (Steen 1997).

Nevertheless, in the ensuing process of consolidating democracy mass support for basic institutions is essential. With little positive engagement for its basic institutions among ordinary people, democracy may wither away. As Linz and Stepan argue, a democratic regime "is consolidated when a strong majority of the public opinion holds the belief that democratic procedures and institutions are the most appropriate way to govern collective life in a society such as theirs ..." (1996, 6). Therefore, in order to understand the consolidation of new democracies, it is necessary to investigate the complex and dynamic relationship between the opinions of elites and non-elites. Moreover, in the case of the Baltic States in question, one has to keep in mind that the downfall

of communism implied not only political changes but also the introduction of a market economy, the re-legitimation of old institutions, such as the police, and the continuity of an embedded religious culture. In other words, the working representative bodies and functioning institutions are vital to a stable society, but so are some non-state institutions, such as private business and the church.

Consolidation of New Democracies

Consolidation of democracy requires the support of elite and masses for the new political order. In this vein, Diamond (1999, 65) defines democratic consolidation as “the process of achieving broad and deep legitimation” across class, ethnic and other boundaries. A new normative commitment to democratic procedures is internalised so that the actor “instinctively conforms to written (and unwritten) rules of the game even when they conflict and compete intensively”. In other words, democracy is internalised only when norms become routine in the political culture. In consolidation, however, it seems that elite views matter more than the mass attitudes because, as Dahl (1971), Putnam (1973) and Diamond (1999) observe, elites have a propensity for a coherent system of beliefs, and these beliefs tend to guide their actions. Nevertheless, elites are not – as democratic elitist theory would argue – completely independent of the mass public, but rather adjusting to public opinion when necessary. For example, as Przeworski argues, social hardships following transition to democracy can lead to the erosion of mass confidence in politicians. Perhaps for this reason elites are usually pragmatic and will “vacillate between the technocratic political style inherent in market-oriented reforms and the participatory style required to maintain consensus” (1991, 189).

Liberal democracy takes roots where various elite groups share core liberal values and agree on “the rules of the game”. Pluralist elite competition, in combination with an “underlying consensus about most norms of political behaviour and the worth of existing political institutions” (Higley and Burton 2006, 14), constitute what Higley and Burton describe as a “consensually unified elite”. The elite political culture is based on the common acceptance of political rules of engagement, especially the rules of open and fair electoral competition. The embedding, deepening and improvement of democracy implies establishing procedures for the peaceful resolution of inevitable conflicts, thus enhancing trust and mutual security among political actors (Dahl 1971; Diamond 1999). In a stable democratic regime the contest for power among different elite factions rests on popular support, which political elites need when competing for votes at elections (Schumpeter 1942/1996). In addition, Dahl insists that in a consolidated democracy a high level of confidence in institutions is also necessary between elections.

Confidence in Institutions

According to Mishler and Rose (1999), legitimacy is established differently in new and old democracies. New democracies are supported mainly for what they *do*, while established democracies are valued also for what they *are*, because of long-term political socialisation. Economic growth and reasonable distribution of resources may be crucial, but there is no immediate relationship between economic misery and political instability. To be politically consequential, an economic and social crisis has to be converted into a political crisis by the political leaders of a country.

Most investigations into institutional confidence in Western democracies have focused on mass attitudes and have generally concluded that confidence in political institutions is relatively low in many Western countries (Listhaug and Wiberg 1992). Indeed, the tendency over time has been towards erosion of public support (Pharr and Putnam 2000), though Listhaug and Wiberg (1995) have painted a less pessimistic picture, claiming that there was no evidence in this regard during the 1980's. Miller (1993), however, had similar findings regarding low levels of trust in political institutions for Russia, Ukraine and Lithuania. With reference to post-Communist regimes, another survey of trust during the early transformation period in 15 different institutions in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Belarus and Ukraine, found very little trust for any civil or political institution. "Scepticism dominates popular evaluations of post-Communist institutions; on average, 53% evaluate an institution sceptically, as against 31 per cent showing distrust and 16 per cent trust" (Rose, Mishler and Haerpfer 1998, 155).

As already noted, democratic governments require mass, as well as elite support. But what are the roots of this support and what is its lasting effect on the legitimacy of democracy? Are these roots to be found in support for institutions, in support for leaders, or in satisfactory outcomes? In Steen (1996) I argue that in a leader-oriented political culture lack of support for institutions as such and their negative performance may be compensated for by beliefs in the leaders of these institutions. Easton (1975) and Gabriel (1992) assert that the most basic kind of legitimacy comes from support for institutions *as such*, irrespective of policy outcomes and popularity of leaders. According to Offe (1997), confidence in democratic institutions *should* be "diffuse" because all basic institutions are valued for their own sake. Confidence in institutions means that people have trust in basic processes that by their very nature sustain some vital social functions, or at least have the potential to do so. An alternative explanation points to "specific support". This suggests that elites and the mass public are rational and act in response to how institutions contribute to their well-being, and to the opportunities they provide. One would expect, therefore, that the outcomes of institutional activities, as well as the popularity of leaders, jointly determine patterns of confidence. According to Barry (1970),

however, it is democratic institutions' policy *performance* over a period of time that gives legitimacy to the political system. Therefore, as Smith (1972, 19) asserts, "value-related explanations take on a subordinate role" for legitimacy and support.

However, performance and symbolic support are normally inter-related. If trust arises from the ability of institutions to produce positive policy outcomes, confidence will depend upon how these outcomes meet the expectations of the elite and the masses. Low confidence will stem not from doubt in institutions as such, but from poor performance feeding back to public perceptions of the institutions. "Specific" support is instrumental and directly related to how performance meets short-term expectations and implies a substantial destabilising potential in times of economic crisis. Economic recession, poor quality of public services and corruption may reduce belief in institutions, but they will not necessarily lead to a widespread desire for change. A real crisis for democracy occurs only when the elite proposes to replace one institution with another.

Methodology and Data

The data on elite attitudes were collected in 1993-1995, 1997, 2000, 2003 and 2006-2007. Between 280 and 315 high-level officials in each country were interviewed using standard questionnaires.¹ The respondents comprise a comparable sample of the national elite, including parliamentary deputies, leading officials from the ministries, directors of major private business companies and state enterprises, and leaders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the judiciary, cultural institutions and local government. About 70 per cent of all parliament deputies were selected according to party strength in the national assemblies. For the other groups the criterion for selection was high level institutional positions. The interviews were carried out after each national election during the period, thus reflecting changes in election results. The samples are deemed representative of *the national elite* in each country during the survey period.²

The following question was asked about various institutions, including parliament, the police, business companies, and the church: "Please tell me how

¹ For details about the number of respondents interviewed for the elite surveys, see Appendix.

² Saar Poll was responsible for carrying out and coding the interviews in Estonia. The first round of interviews in Latvia was carried out in cooperation with the Department of Political Science, University of Latvia, later rounds by Baltic Data House. In Lithuania, the market research company Baltic Surveys was responsible for conducting the survey. In total, the face to face interviews lasted approximately one hour, including a series of other questions.

much confidence you have in each of the institutions listed: a great deal, quite a lot, not very much or not at all?”

A similar question was asked in several representative population surveys for the same period.³ The question wording was the following: “I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it”.⁴

Patterns of Confidence

I start by investigating the development of elite and mass support for two institutions inherently associated with *regime change* (parliament and private business), and two institutions that are *continuing from the past* (the police from the previous regime, and the church even from the pre-Soviet period). Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania struggled for independence during the late 1980s, when nationalist elites mobilized a wave of widespread public protests, and formally changed from authoritarian to democratic rule after the Soviet collapse in 1991⁵ (Misiunas and Taagepera 1993; Lieven 1993; Gerner and Hedlund 1993; Smith 1994; Nørgaard 1996; Clemens 2001). At the same time, state economic planning was replaced by market economy, and freedom of religion replaced state-imposed atheism. One may assume that the elite’s and the people’s experiences from the national struggle for independence is an important symbolic context that over the following years have influenced their confidence in the four institutions investigated here. The results may be considered as indicating how various types of institutions meet the diffuse and material expectations of the

³ The representative population surveys in 1992 and 1997 included more than 1,000 respondents in each of the three countries. These surveys were conducted by the author, financed by the Norwegian Research Council, and carried out by the following survey agencies: Emor (Estonia), Latvian Social Research Centre (Latvia) and Lithuanian Social Research Centre (Lithuania). The mass data from 1999 is from the European Value Survey, and this survey has the same wording of the question as in the elite-study. Data for the mass attitudes in 2004, 2005 and 2007 are retrieved from the Eurobarometer. The population data for the period from 1999-2007 has kindly been provided by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD).

The years in the figures refer to the year in which the elite surveys were begun, even though the field work for some of the surveys had to be carried over into the next year. And sporadically the elite surveys and the mass polls did not correspond in time.

⁴ One should keep in mind that this question is somewhat different from the question used in the elite survey. Another difference is for the category business-institution. In the elite survey and mass survey in 1992 the term “major business companies” was used while in 1997 the term is “private business companies”. In the European Value Survey and the Eurobarometer survey the term “major business companies” was used.

⁵ There exists a large literature on the Baltic States’ roads to independence in 1991 and the following consolidation period. Here I mention only some central contributions.

elites and the mass public in these states – with obvious consequences for democratic consolidation and sustainability.

This study is, to the best of my knowledge, the first that compares levels of confidence and elite-mass convergence longitudinally. Previous research on elite-mass orientations suffers from lack of diachronic data – different countries being compared at only one point in time. When national contexts are very different, it opens the way for diverse explanations, so that conclusions for one country cannot be easily drawn for another. To try to overcome this problem, I compare three small neighbouring countries that are quite similar in size and basic national historical, cultural, structural and political contexts. One may argue that the Baltic States are close to a “laboratory” for social research and lend themselves to a “most similar systems” research design looking for country variation and holding context variables as constants. This makes it possible to identify specific explanatory variables that may account for national differences in patterns of confidence. Using longitudinal data also enables conclusions to be drawn about actual similarities and differences in patterns of confidence in various institutions between elites and masses, as well as meaning that one can dig more deeply into the dynamic aspect of democratic legitimation. However, the main focus here is not on explaining specific differences between the three countries but rather on how theories of liberal democracy and democratic elitism may explain why we find that elites invest more confidence in new institutions than the mass public.

First, confidence in the four institutions is compared for each country. Then, the patterns found for each institution are contrasted between the countries. This is done by investigating three research questions:

- 1) How much confidence is there among elites and the mass publics?
- 2) How high is the level of elite-mass congruence?
- 3) What is the trend over time both with respect to 1. and 2.?

As mentioned earlier, liberal democratic theory and democratic elitism predict different patterns of confidence among elites and non-elites, which can be tested empirically.

The Results

The figures below show the patterns of confidence in the four institutions and are compared for the period 1992-2007.

Estonia

Figure 1a: Confidence in Parliament

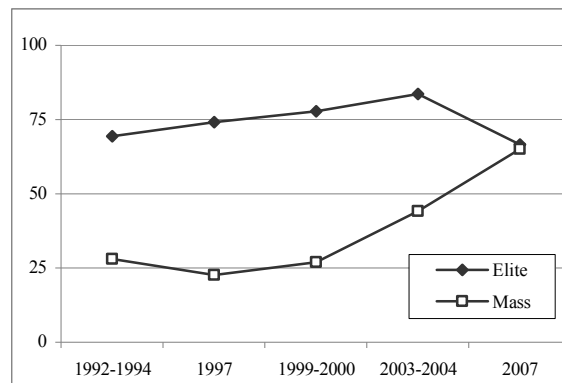
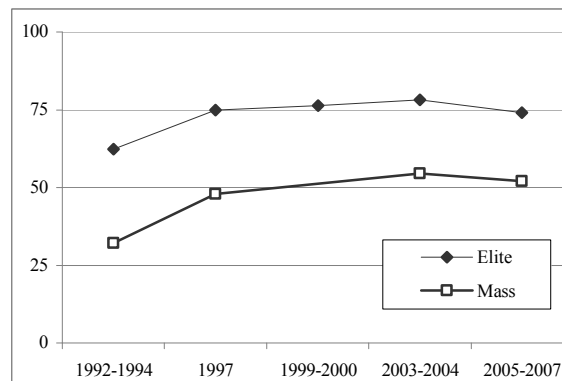


Figure 1b: Confidence in the Business Companies



Confidence in *parliament* (Figure 1a) follows a pattern of convergence. It is evident that people's confidence in parliament have undergone positive development, while elite's confidence, after being on a very high level for many years, plateau and then slightly decline. This pattern indicates that the elite are

a defence to democracy during the consolidation period and that gradually the mass public is adopting the elite views.

Business companies (Figure 1b) enjoy a high and stable level of confidence among the elites over the entire period – similar to trust in parliament. The mass public was initially quite negative in their attitudes to private business, but one sees a rapid change in these attitudes. However, the masses' level of confidence in private business remained on a markedly lower level compared to that of the elites during the entire period covered by our research.

Figure 1c: Confidence in the Police

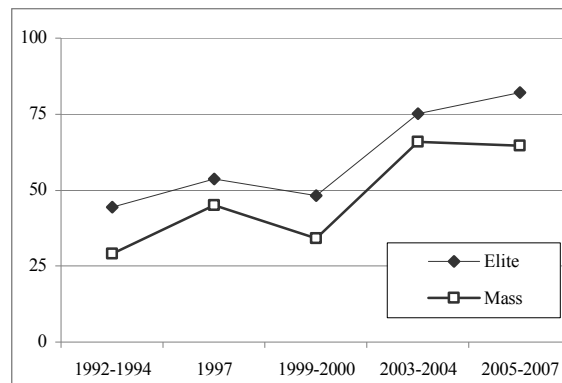
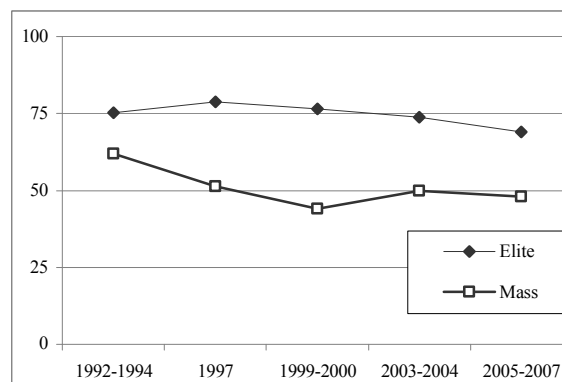


Figure 1d: Confidence in the Church



Confidence in the *police* (Figure 1c) exhibits a different pattern. Both elite and masses are distrustful of the police during the 1990s, but from 2000 onwards there is a parallel sharp increase in confidence. Indeed, it is striking how con-

gruent the level and developments are for these two groups over the entire period.

As can be seen, confidence in *the church* (Figure 1d) was high among both groups in the early 1990s, but took a downward turn over time, although not dramatically. At the end of the period, confidence is still high, especially among the elites.

Latvia

Figure 2a: Confidence in the Parliament

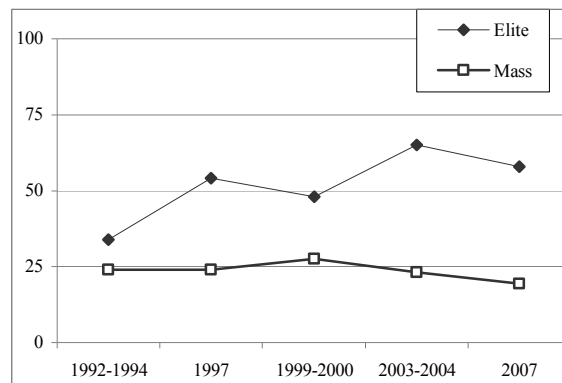
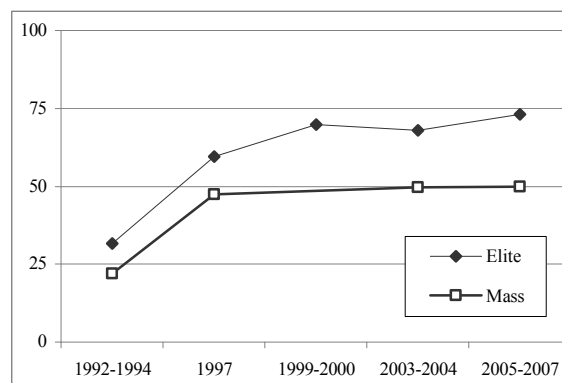


Figure 2b: Confidence in Business Companies



Initially, the elite and mass confidence in *parliament* (Figure 2a) was both at the same low level. However, while the masses continue to be sceptical throughout the whole period, elites' confidence in parliament clearly increases

over time. The low level of confidence of the people, and the widening elite-mass gap, are surprising and puzzling.

Confidence in the *business companies* (Figure 2b) among elites started on a low level (about 30 per cent) but had risen to over than 70 per cent by the end of the period. The general public was also very critical in the beginning with little more than 20 per cent expressing confidence in the new economic system. This lasted until the mid 1990s, and by the late 1990s we see a substantial change of attitude so that, by the end of the survey period, about 50 per cent of the masses expressed confidence in business companies. Nevertheless, the elite-mass gap is considerable after 1997.

Figure 2c: Confidence in the Police

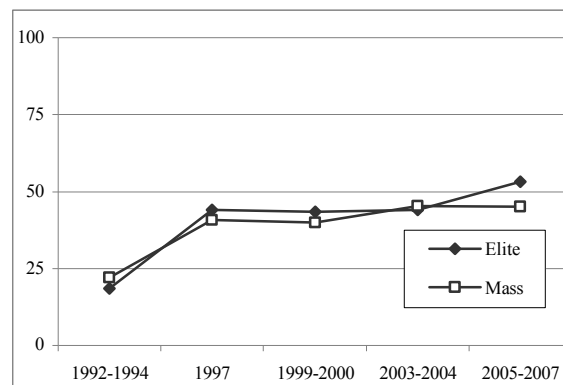


Figure 2d: Confidence in the Church



At the beginning of the survey period, confidence in the *police* (Figure 2c) was very low for both elites and the mass public. Over time, however, attitudes of

the two groups rise somewhat. Elite-mass congruence is rather high across the entire period.

Confidence in the *church* (Figure 2d) has an inverted U-shape during the period. It exhibits a fairly similar and parallel pattern among the elite and the masses until 1997. Starting on a relatively high level, with 54-64 per cent expressing confidence just after change of regime the support is increasing until the end of the 1990s and then declines in both groups. In particular among the masses the confidence drops significantly.

Lithuania

Figure 3a: Confidence in the Parliament

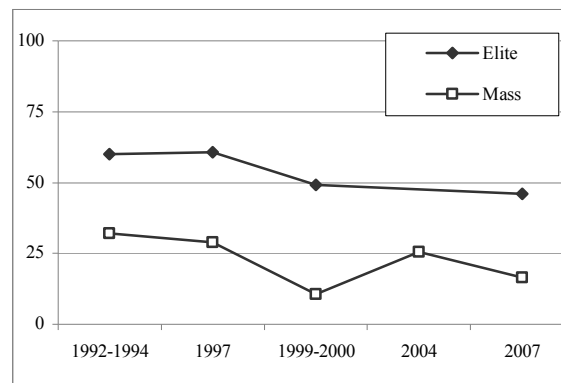
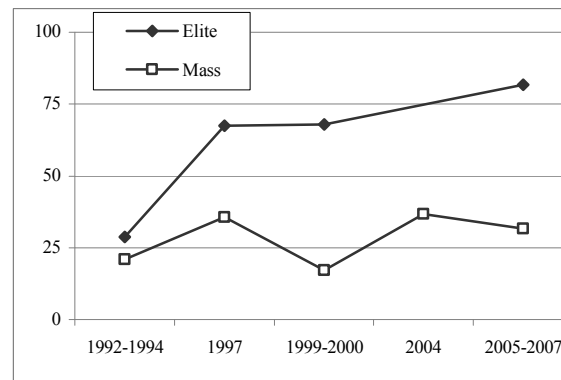


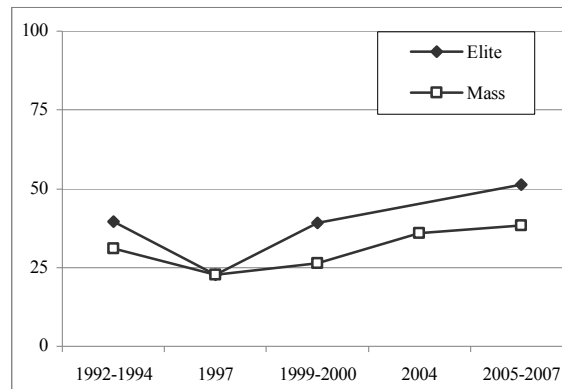
Figure 3b: Confidence in Business Companies



Reports of level of confidence in *parliament* (Figure 3a) show parallel downward trends in the elites and the masses. In the early period, the elites' confidence was 60 per cent, but by the end of the survey period this has declined to less than 50 per cent. The level of confidence shown by the masses is much lower. It starts at around 30 per cent, but then declines to less than 20 per cent by 2007. From the viewpoint of democratic consolidation, the parallel downward trend among both elites and masses may be cause for concern and even raise doubt about the basic legitimacy of the parliament. However, elite confidence is still on a considerable higher level than mass confidence.

As can be seen, *business companies* (Figure 3b) initially experienced the same low level of confidence (between 20 per cent and 30 per cent) among both the elites and masses. During the period of economic transformations, however, the gap enlarged noticeably with elites' confidence increasing to more than 80 per cent by the end of the period, while that of the masses remained low.

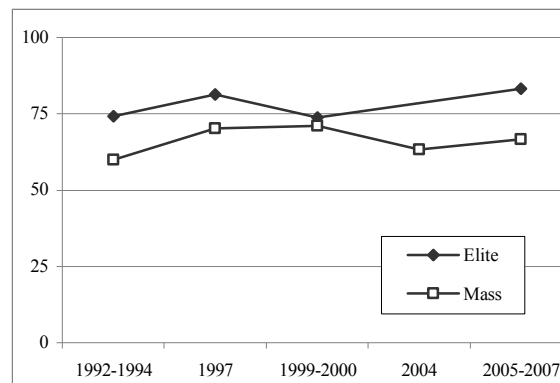
Figure 3c: Confidence in the Police



Looking at trends in level of confidence in the *police* (Figure 3c), we see a rather congruent pattern among elites and masses. Both groups express more trust in the later period, with the elites on a somewhat higher level, but the difference is rather small.

The level of elite and mass confidence in the *church* (Figure 3d) was initially high (75 per cent and 60 per cent, respectively) and remains rather stable over time. Elite confidence continues to exist on a somewhat higher level compared to the general population, but with only minor differences.

Figure 3d: Confidence in the Church



Converging Attitudes?

Some common tendencies are obvious. In all three countries during the whole period, elites have more confidence in the four institutions than the mass public. Sometimes the elite-masses gap is wide, and at other times quite small and converging. The trend is occasionally going in different directions for the two groups. Despite such variations, the main pattern overall is clear: elites have more confidence than the mass public, especially in the new institutions of parliament and the free market. This gives support to the argument of democratic elitism: during the process of democratic consolidation, the elite constitute the major force for legitimating fundamental political, economic and social institutions. This conclusion is supported by the comparison of new and old institutions. The very hallmark of state transformation from authoritarian rule and central economic planning to democracy and market economy was a freely elected parliament and business companies operating in a competitive economy. Other institutions, like the police, largely represent a bridge between organizations and persons from the past regime and those of the new. This also can be applied to the church, which is rooted in common historical traditions that are often enshrined in religious practices.

It is remarkable that in all three countries the gap in confidence between the elite and the masses is much wider for the new institutions representing democracy and market economy while confidence in the old institutions (police and the church) shows much more congruence. From a liberal democratic perspective, the paradox is that institutions symbolizing the very core of regime-change, namely, democracy and a market economy have their main supporters among the elites, while the mass public, which is from this perspective seen as the very fundament of democracy, lags behind and remains more critical.

Both the degree of convergence and the level of confidence vary considerably between the three countries and over time. As for confidence in parliament, in Estonia the significant gap between confident elites and a critical population that is seen in the early period after transition is narrowing over time. In Latvia, however, the attitudes of elites and masses concerning confidence in parliament are quite similar in the beginning but differ significantly during the rest of the period. And in Lithuania, the substantial gap seen in the early period between mass and elite views persists, and the overall levels of confidence decline. Summing up the patterns for confidence in parliament, the Estonian elite and masses show that both groups are converging on a higher level. The Latvian pattern is divergence, with only elites reaching a higher level of confidence and the masses lagging behind. While in Lithuania a major difference in the start remains stable and is shifting to a lower level of confidence for both groups.

Level of confidence in business companies is similar in Estonia and Latvia, and is growing for both elites and non-elites, so that by the end of the survey period there is the same high level in both countries. Lithuania is different, with the gap between an increasingly confident elite and a critical mass public widening over time. Confidence in the police in Estonia and Latvia is changing from initial low levels of trust to a more positive perception among the elites and the masses. We observe the same upward and congruent trend over time. The Lithuanian pattern is rather similar to Latvia, but with a dramatic drop in confidence in 1997. Regarding the church, in all three countries the level of confidence is high for both elites and non-elites. However, there is less confidence in Estonia and Latvia than in Lithuania, especially among the mass public.

Overall, the main result concerning elite-mass congruence is that, regarding the new institutions, the gap in level of confidence remains stable, although tending to increase over time. One exception to this trend is confidence associated with the Estonian parliament. Here elite-masses attitudes are converging, but primarily as a result of declining confidence among elites.

Why do we find a deviant pattern of confidence in Lithuania in regards to the two new institutions? This difference may be explained by ethnic structure, political cleavages and elite recruitment. After change of regime in 1991, Estonia and Latvia had a large percentage of Russians and Russian-speakers among their population, while in Lithuania the proportion was much lower. In Estonia and Latvia (with percentage of indigenous people of 62 per cent and 52 per cent, respectively, compared to Lithuania's 80 per cent) nationalists saw their re-born nations as "swamped by" and vulnerable to Russian influence. The perceived threat from large Russian Diasporas with close ties to their homeland resulted in more renewed and integrated national elites than in Lithuania (Steen 2000; 2006). Here a clearly politicized socio-economic cleavage, and much higher elite continuity from the past, led to political confrontations along the left-right axis from the beginning, resulting in more fragmented elite configurations in Lithuania (Steen 1997b). In Estonia and Latvia, by contrast, ethnicity

became the main political cleavage. This resulted in a more integrated national elite characterized by more uniform attitudes, less antagonist behaviour, and more consensual orientations towards reform policies (Steen 1997a). As has been shown by Steen (2007), in Estonia the exceptionally rapid privatization of state property, economic “shock therapy”, the “race towards the market” and early aspiration to be a part of European structures was pushed forward by integrated elites. One explanation as to why, despite economic hardships for the masses, Estonia has been in the lead with regard to confidence in new institutions is a cultural identity based on ethnicity favourable to inter-elite trust and cohesion across social divisions.

Conclusion: Confidence and Democratic Theory

Liberal democratic theory takes account of the elite-dimension (Dahl 1971) but not as an independent force in the processes of democratic consolidation. This approach has a normative scent where the quality of democracy depends on the degree to which social interests are represented in the political process. Petterson (2010, 125) argues that some extent of elite-mass congruence is fundamental to legitimacy and therefore “is more likely to occur in the more advanced democracies”. In this study of 2006 that compared the pro-democratic orientations of members of parliaments and those of the mass public in five new and two old democracies, Petterson (2010) found that, in all countries, the parliament deputies and the masses score on the same level in pro-democratic orientations, be it high or low. This indicates that the elites and the masses in each country relate to democratic norms in the same way, e.g. negative views of elites reflect negative views of population. Further, Petterson argues, this result is consistent with liberal democratic theory underscoring *interdependence and similarity* between elites and mass orientations. Congruent democratic orientations contradict the democratic elitist theory’s assumption of a successive process where the values and orientations of independent liberal elites are formed early in the transition process and adopted later by the mass public, be it through socialization or manipulation.

The findings presented here are based on a broader selection of elites and draw another picture of the elite-mass relationship, but only in respect of confidence in the new institutions, that is, parliament and private business companies. The sizeable gap between elite and mass levels of confidence over more than a decade demonstrates that elites are not representing the masses more sceptical views. Elites’ views are independent, and as the figures illustrate, they change their views at a different pace to those of the masses, sometimes in a different direction, and not necessarily towards more confidence. Despite some variations among the three countries, the main finding is that the elites are clearly more confident in the institutions created after the change of regime. This supports an essential assumption in the theory of democratic elitism as

argued by Higley and Burton (2006), namely that the elites are not representing the more sceptical mass views, but are taking the lead in embracing the new democratic and economic institutions. Clearly, the elites are not expressing the same degree of disbelief in new institutions as the masses, but on the other hand the masses do not reject their leaders. In the Baltic States just after change of regime, mass trust in the *leaders* of political and economic institutions tended to be higher than the confidence in these institutions “as such” (Steen 1996). Paradoxically, in the early consolidation period the masses were overtly critical of the new institutions but seemed to entrust leaders with the mandate to go forward and make the painful but necessary reform decisions.

Although the trend-lines for confidence in *parliament and business companies* show that the elite and mass dimensions are separable and sequential, the patterns vary markedly between the countries. The top-down socialization, or may be manipulation, effect seems to be considerably stronger in Estonia and Latvia than in Lithuania. As demonstrated, confidence in the old institutions, namely the *police* and the *church*, shows another dynamic. The largely corresponding attitudes indicate that the same stable expectations and experiences are common across social strata. And, surprisingly, if congruence of mass-elite confidence is a main characteristic of democratic legitimacy, as liberal democratic theory argues, old institutions continuing from the past are more legitimate than new institutions. On the other hand, democratic elitist theory maintains that the very lack of congruent orientations shows that responsible elites are the vanguards of democratic and economic change, and resist mass pressures to vacillate between reform and populism.

I will conclude by saying that democratic elitism, emphasizing the role of elites as political entrepreneurs, seems to provide a better explanation of *degree of congruence* and the persistent elite-mass gap in confidence in new core institutions related to regime change, than liberal democratic theory. Obviously, elites’ stronger support for new institutions following regime change is vital to political stability and economic reforms. However, specific historical circumstances, ethnic structures and political cleavages affect elite configurations and mass orientations, and largely account for differences found between countries. Taking *the level and direction* of elite and masses confidence into consideration gives a fairly detailed picture of how elites are both the vanguard of democratic regime consolidation and rooted in national contexts that generate different opportunities and constraints for expressing confidence in institutions.

Appendix

Total Number of Elites Interviewed

| | 1993/94 | 1997 | 2000 | 2003 | 2006/07 |
|-----------|---------|------|------|------|---------|
| Estonia | 313 | 284* | 281 | 271 | 264 |
| Latvia | 300 | 300 | 285 | 280 | 280 |
| Lithuania | 333 | 307 | 315 | ** | 316 |

* Due to the small number of respondents from the Estonian parliament in the first survey that year, an additional round of interviews with the members of parliament was done later the same year.

** No interviews were carried out in Lithuania in 2003.

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